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Howard Co. purchases Long Reach Village Center for \$5M

Redevelopment plans to be announced Monday

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Howard County government has finalized the purchase of the shopping center in Columbia's Long Reach Village Center for \$5 million, county officials said this week.

Plans to purchase of the shopping center were announced earlier this year, and the County Council approved legislation that created an exception, allowing the government to purchase the private commercial land because of its rundown condition.

County officials, and representatives from the village, will unveil plans to redevelop the retail space on Monday at 1 p.m.

The county closed on the purchase on Oct. 1, and crews from the department of recreation and parks have been on site, performing landscaping and other cleanup efforts, said county spokesman David Nitkin.

The state of the village center has declined in recent years, leading to the county's decision to declare it a blight zone. An independent study conducted this year -- and funded by two county agencies and the Columbia Association -- found that the center had a 65 percent vacancy rate.

Most of that vacancy is tied to the 55,000 square-foot anchor space that had been occupied by the Family Market and Safeway. Safeway, which left in 2012, sublet the property to the Family Market before evicting the grocer because of a failure to pay rent. The space has been unoccupied since July 2013.

One possibility floated for revitalizing the center was to develop it as a center for the arts. The scenario could include a relocation of the Howard County Arts Council from Ellicott City, pairing it with the Columbia Arts Center, owned by the Columbia Association, which already operates in the space.

Calvin Ball, council member representing Long Reach, said the purchase is "a tremendous step" in returning Long Reach to "a premier gathering place for the community."

"This has been an ongoing community process," Ball said. "We recognize the importance of coming together to stabilize the downturn of the Long Reach Village Center. We were very concerned about the direction it was heading and we knew we had to come together as a community with an innovative redevelopment strategy."